

Book Review: *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*. Edited by Laurence J. C. Ma and Carolyn Cartier. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

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Article:

This book contributes to research on Chinese who are living outside China, a corpus that has steadily expanded since the mid-1960s. Ma's introductory essay clearly sets out the historical periodicity of the explosion of population from China as part of global push-pull movements reflecting early efforts to escape domestic rebellions by building railroads. The migration flow, which was unleashed in the watershed restructuring year of 1965, has culminated in the contemporary bifurcation, from highly educated aspirants to desperate "container migrants" following shady "snake heads." Schools of theoretical explanations and classifications of migration are also set out, along with their shortcomings for dealing with the complexity of the Chinese experience. Well-published authors who are conversant in their geographic locales, including Cindy Fan on Los Angeles, Sen-dou Chang on Hawaii, Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh on Singapore, David Lai on the Canadian experience, and Jack Williams on the Taiwanese as *hua ch'iao*, contribute meaty and thoughtful essays that touch on the varied nature of receiving areas.

The useful concept of transnationalism, as applied to the Chinese experience, is defined as "the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (p. 4), with an emphasis on the process and functioning of networks. The term diaspora is used to denote both the spatially linked places and processes of transmigration and linked economic activity. New trends include new sending areas, such as earlier receiving sites that have become origin as well as destination regions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. The picture that is presented in the various case studies in this book of diasporic experiences, both en route and in their settlement communities in various places around the world, contributes an unprecedented breadth to the varieties and complexity that are involved. Different economic, educational, occupational, culturally literate, and ethnic groups with various degrees of connectedness came through different means with different intentions to different places. There is little that is simple in this picture, although Ma points out that this is primarily an economically motivated migration (if not exclusively "trade based," as some have asserted).

However, some cautions are in order. In an era when explanations and effects of globalization are often reduced to an economic framework, some of the authors place too little emphasis (as an unspoken, or unconscious, corrective?) on the previously popular focus on the *guanxi* glue of family, the importance of securing the best educational opportunities for offspring, and culture (most frequently in the form of food and written language) holding together the "bamboo network." Such a switch in emphasis needs to be dealt with more directly. And beyond the lengthy litany of coping mechanisms that are attempted in different places, an assessment of relative success needs to be attempted. The analysis of the contemporary diaspora experience, such as Singaporeans in Beijing, could have been strengthened by comparing the literature on corporate and cultural expatriates in general and examining the potentially similar underlying psychology of coping in an alien country. Perhaps one key to the survival of Chinese distinctiveness lies in linguistics: non-Chinese are always "foreigners"—literally "outside country" people, rather than migrants who carry an internalized gyroscopic sense of a cultural self.

A definite geographic contribution of this study is its explicit emphasis on the importance of the characteristics of receiving areas: the “space-and-place” component. Integrally geographic notions of scale (island and continent, core and periphery locations) are also explicitly part of the analysis, underlining the importance of a geographic perspective. The case-study chapters present a great deal of interesting and updated quantitative data in a variety of formats. As each author appears familiar with his or her subject locale, the detail, complexity, and sensitivity to the migrant population’s evolution over time and within specific circumstances provides substantial contributions to the literature at large. Some of the richness falls out of the summary final chapter, with its emphasis on the Hong Kong experience, unique by its proximity and thus possibilities for interaction with the Mainland sending region. The suggestion of the importance of a mesoscale sending region on the diaspora experience undercuts earlier inquiries into the classification of sustaining Chineseness and the important differences in receiving regions—why else the chapter divisions by destination? The Malaysian experience of class-based identity is also raised again as undermining assertions of cultural and sending-region linkages.

Some problems that could have been usefully addressed include the important first map of Chinese distribution (p. 17), plagued by too many categories with too little gray distinctions between them and too much obscuring overlapping “bubbles.” Additional editorial energy could have combined the reference citations at the end of each chapter into a more accessible total bibliography at the back. The amply demonstrated multiplicity of experiences and places does, indeed, produce “tangled” geographies, providing intriguing material for continued examinations well fueled by the work of this volume’s authors.